

Inter Mirifica some 50 years later

Necessary information

Besides practicing communication, Vatican II also spoke about it in its Decree on the Means of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, which was adopted with a surprisingly large negative vote of 503 opposed, with 1,598 in favor. More than objections to what the document says, this apparently reflected disappointment at its lack of a forward-looking vision of media.

But the decree did call for a more detailed treatment of the subject after the council. That project was taken up by a newly established Pontifical Commission (later, Council) for Social Communications. The result, seven and a half years later, was *Communio et Progressio* (“Communion and Progress”), a “pastoral instruction” that takes a highly positive view of the media and the Church’s relationship with them.

Especially significant is what it says about news and information, for instance, this affirmation of the public service rendered by responsible journalism: “Modern man cannot do without information that is full, consistent, accurate and true. ... Only in this way can he assume a responsible and active role in his community and be a part of its economic, political, cultural and religious life” (No. 34).

After considering the media in general, the pastoral instruction then speaks about media and the Church. Here it advocates openness — what today would be called transparency — in making information public: “Since the development of public opinion within the Church is essential [Pope Pius XII had said that a half-century earlier], individual Catholics have the right to all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church” (No. 119).

Further Reading

Published in 1974 by author Richard N. Ostling, “*Secrecy in the Church*” remains one of the best studies on the information policies and practices of the Catholic Church and other churches. Ostling, an evangelical Christian, was to become religion editor of *Time* magazine and then chief religion writer of *The Associated Press*. In the book’s introduction he writes:

“Freedom of information is part of democratic theory, and the Catholic Church makes no claims to being a democracy. Even so, it has a vital stake in this freedom.

“For one thing, there is a strong Christian tradition in favor of open information. For another, Catholic philosophy traditionally puts great confidence in the reason of the individual human being, and a closed-door culture is an admission that Church leaders look upon Christians as children rather than as fully responsible members of the body of Christ. ...

“The secular culture may become more open, or more secretive, and thus affect the Church, but the Church must first of all be true to itself, to its own teachings and traditions.”

U.S. bishops

Back in the United States, relations between the Church and the news media were strained at the time the pastoral instruction came out. Much of the conflict focused on the bishops and their general meetings.

Before Vatican II, bishops' meetings in the United States had been closed affairs attracting little attention from the press. But the council created unprecedented journalistic interest in the Catholic Church. Now much of that interest was concentrated on the bishops as they labored to create and operate a national episcopal conference according to the council's prescriptions while also coping with the new phenomenon of public dissent in the Church.

The bishops responded to the new media interest by inviting reporters to cover their twice-yearly general assemblies and providing them with a pressroom and occasional briefings. What they didn't provide was access to the meeting itself. Instead, they met behind closed doors, while reporters fumed in their pressroom or roamed the halls seeking stray members of the hierarchy willing to serve as anonymous sources.

Eventually good sense prevailed, with *Communio et Progressio*'s strong endorsement of openness helping produce that result. At their meeting in November 1971, the bishops approved admitting designated observers by a vote of 169-76 and gave the nod to reporters by the narrower margin of 144-106. The new system went into effect the following April at their spring general meeting in Atlanta.

Richard Ostling, reporting for Time, called the scene there "extraordinary."

He wrote: "This had never been permitted in the U.S., or hardly anywhere else, in modern times. The U.S. bishops' move to an open-door policy was the end of an era in which secrecy was virtually an unquestioned fact in policy formulation."

Ongoing issues

The open-door policy remained in place in the United States for the next 20 years. For the most part, it served reporters, bishops and the public reasonably well. But for unknown reasons, change again set in during the mid-1990s.

From the start, the bishops had insisted on holding one session of each general meeting, usually an afternoon, behind closed doors. Now, without explanation, more and more time began to be devoted to secret sessions. In Baltimore last November, a full day of the three-and-a-half day assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops took place in executive session.

So far as is known, the principal topic of the bishops' closed-door deliberations last fall was the Synod of Bishops on the family, held in Rome a month earlier. Since the American bishops' views on this sometimes controversial synod were what concerned Catholics most wanted to know, imposing secrecy on this discussion meant cutting off a significant portion of the Catholic public from information it had a legitimate, urgent interest in.

Forty-three years earlier, the pastoral instruction on communications said secrecy in the Church should be limited to "matters that involve the good name of individuals, or that touch upon the rights of people" (*Communio et Progressio*, No. 121). The USCCB, following its usual practice, gave no explanation for its closed doors.

Illuminating issues

Nothing better illustrates the dangers of systematic secrecy than the cover-up of clergy sex abuse. That a small number of priests were offenders had been public knowledge since the mid-1980s, but it wasn't until January 2002, starting with reports in the Boston Globe and continuing in news media elsewhere in the months that followed, that the facts of the cover-up by Church authorities came to light.

Since then, virtually every American diocese has taken steps to deal with abuse and prevent it from happening again. The bishops have promised transparency. But the failures of the past, shielded so long from public knowledge by systematic concealment, unquestionably have done serious and lasting harm to the Church's credibility.

Related Reading

And now? In the last two years, Pope Francis' success with the media has done a lot to improve the Church's image. Reporters like Pope Francis because he's good copy — a straight shooter who says interesting, sometimes controversial things, especially when he talks off the top of his head. [Vatican's vast media](#) by Greg Erlandson

Now, though, questions are starting to be raised. In an interview with The New York Times, even Cardinal Francis George, recently retired as Archbishop of Chicago, noted the “wonderful things” the pope says but added that he “doesn't put them together all the time, so you're left at times puzzling over what his intention is.”

On top of that, some loyal Catholics were dismayed by views on divorce and homosexuality expressed at last fall's synod. Actions seemingly intended to manipulate news coverage were no help. In a throwback to the early days of Vatican II, official bulletins reporting the debate left out speakers' names. Reports submitted to the synod office by bishops' conferences were withheld from the press. The same thing was attempted with small group reports, although the synod fathers themselves said no to that.

A committee appointed by Pope Francis and headed by former British government official Chris Patten currently is studying Vatican communications. (Our Sunday Visitor's president and publisher, Greg Erlandson, is a member.) It's expected to make its recommendations later this year.

Glitches and false steps at the synod underline a need to go beyond structures and budgets and tackle fundamental matters of policy and vision regarding news and information — not just at the Vatican but in official Church circles everywhere. Considering the key role played by news and information in today's world and today's Church, how the Church relates to news media is too important to ignore.

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Vatican Document on Modern Media

To mark the 20th anniversary of the post-Vatican II pastoral instruction on social communications, *Communio et Progressio* (“Communion and Progress”), the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in early 1992 published an updated pastoral instruction

called *Aetatis Novae* (“A New Era”). It still stands as the Church’s most recent comprehensive overview of modern media.

Under the heading “Media at the Service of Ecclesial Communion,” *Aetatis Novae* stresses the importance of effective internal communication in building and sustaining community in the Church. It says, in part:

“Partly this is a matter of maintaining and enhancing the Church’s credibility and effectiveness. But, more fundamentally, it is one of the ways of realizing in a concrete manner the Church’s character as communion ... Among the members of the community of persons who make up the Church, there is a radical equality in dignity and mission which arises from baptism and underlies hierarchical structure and diversity of office and function; and this equality necessarily will express itself in an honest and respectful sharing of information and opinions” (No. 10).

Source (accessed 20 January 2019):

<https://www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/ByIssue/Article/TabId/735/ArtMid/13636/ArticleID/17064/Mass-Media-Examining-the-relationship-between-the-Church-and-the-press.aspx>